
The Conceptualization of Genre in Systemic Functional Linguistics

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Received: 17/04/2018	Revised: 14/06/2018	Published: 31/10/2018
How to cite (in APA style):		
Alyousef, S, H., Alyahya, M, A. (2018). The Conceptualization of Genre in Systemic Functional Linguistics. <i>Jurnal RETORIKA: Jurnal Ilmu Bahasa</i> , 4(2), 91-99. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.22225/jr.4.2.665.91-99		

Abstract—Genre constitutes the rhetorical features of a text and the semiotic communicative purpose(s) it serves. It has marveled Systemic Functional Linguistics’ (SFL) scholars as to whether it should be treated as an aspect of the situational context (register) or as a distinct cultural semiotic system that correlates with texture—i.e. the three register categories of field, tenor, and mode. This paper aims to review the conceptualization of genre in the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) tradition. Whereas Halliday associates genre with mode, Martin coordinates the three register variables of field, tenor, and mode in relation to social purpose. The elements of a schematic structure are generated by genre networks, which in turn preselect particular values of field, tenor and mode in a given culture. Both Halliday’s context of situation and Martin’s context of culture levels are dynamic connotative semiotic systems through which new meanings are created by the three processes of semogenesis. Genre is conceived as a distinct cultural semiotic system, rather than an aspect of ‘mode’, that correlates with texture. Martin later avoided the intertextual glosses context of culture and context of situation since Halliday used them for instantiation, and not supervenience. The three register variables of language organize information at the level of genre into coherent texts. Modelled as register and genre, the stratified model of context configures meanings not only through discourse semantics, lexicogrammar, and phonology but also through the prosodic phases of evaluation. Halliday calls this model applicable linguistics since it enables us to develop a powerful model of language that is both “theoretical” and “applied” (Mahboob & Knight, 2010).

Keywords: Applicable linguistics; genre; language metafunctions; mode; register; systemic functional linguistics (SFL);

I. INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades or more, the term genre has marveled numerous professionals in the field of research and pedagogy. Genre is a concept that gained huge interest in several areas and disciplines, such as applied linguistics, literature, arts and media, whether in first language or second language contexts. In the area of applied linguistics, the concept of genre has become a framework for analyzing

and classifying discourse. Educationists, scholars, and curriculum designers have all relied on genre to develop practices in their fields, such as applied linguistics, writing, rhetoric, and English for specific purposes. In applied linguistics, as an example, genre and register theory are used to analyze, describe, design and classify various discourses, such as curricula and program designs, instructional and interactions and classrooms discourse (e.g. Kołata, 2010; Macken-Horarik & Adoniou,

2008; Rose, 2014).

Due to the attention genre got across different disciplines, it was conceptualized, described and approached differently by different theoretical schools. Not only was genre theoretically different across various schools but also there was a difference in genre as a theory (Halliday, 1978; J.R. Martin, 1985, 1992, 1999, 2009, 2011) and genre in pedagogy (i.e., genre-based teaching) (Bhatia, 1993; Miller, 2015; Swales, 1990). The difference in pedagogy was more apparent than in theory. In pedagogy, the features of genre were viewed and stressed differently by the three schools. For example, in the ESP approach, genre is considered the communicative purpose of an activity. Whereas, in SFL, genre is considered a staged activity with a specific goal where learners engage in activities as members of a certain group (Hyon, 1996). Genre-based pedagogy tools (e.g. Alyousef, forthcoming; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Derewianka, 1990; Hyland, 2007; Rose, 2014) can be used by instructors to guide students in learning different genres that lead to their success.

The practical aspects of genre theory, however, are beyond the scope of this paper which attempts to explore the theoretical grounds of genre and how it is conceptualized in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The keywords “genre,” “genre and register of discourse,” and “genre theory” were used to search published SFL and genre-based ebooks, studies and reviews in a variety of academic databases since 1960: ERIC, EBSCO Host, ScienceDirect, Wiley Online Library, Academic Search Ultimate, and Education Research Complete. As genre approach was elaborated by the ‘Sydney School,’ the works of Martin (1985, 1992, 1999, 2009, 2011) and the late Halliday and Hasan were included in the review. Unrelated studies and exact duplicates were removed, generating few studies that have addressed the theoretical aspects of genre and how it is conceptualized in SFL. This indicates the need to review these sporadic *studies*. The review is presented as follows; the first part is about genre in the literature in general, while the second part is about genre in SFL, and whether we should treat it as a single- stratum or a two-stratum model.

II. METHOD

This study is designed in qualitative study approach through making use of

explorative strategy in collecting data. Chronological development History of research on genre, started from the past two decades was explored to bring into discussion in this overviewing study. A large number of researches on genre were, therefore, collected to provide construing comparison between Holliday’s genre and Martin’s three kinds of register. Data is presented in inductive way by describing the genre and register in different contexts, e.g. literature, SFL, SFL as a single-stratum model, SFL as a two-stratum model. Once these activities finished, conclusions are drawn on and implications are provided.

III. DISCUSSION

Genre in the literature

In the literature, genre was described as a growing force, a dynamic movement, and controversial. As a result, it was not only conceived differently in applied linguistics, but also the topic of debates and conferences, such as North America’s conference titled *Rethinking Genre Twenty Years Later in Ottawa in 1992*, *Strictly Genre?* in Sydney in 1993 and the well-known series of *Working with Genre in Australia* during the years 1989, 1991, and 1993. Also, several debates by Martin, Christie, and Rothery (1987), Sawyer and Watson (1987), Freedman (1993), Freedman and Medway (2003), and more recently debates by a number of SFL scholars, such as Martin (2012, August 17) and Bartlett (2012, August 25).

Hyon (1996) noted that there are three schools that approached genre differently in applied linguistics, and at the same time had essential impact on it. The three schools are: (1) SFL, (2) English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and (3) the North American New Rhetoric. SFL takes a linguistic approach towards genre by applying functional grammar and discourse theories. The linguistic choices made are influenced by the speaker’s/ writer’s social purposes. Genre pedagogy in the Sydney School (e.g. Alyousef, forthcoming; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Derewianka, 1990; Hyland, 2007; Rose, 2014) is based on enabling educators to guide their students in learning different genres that lead to success in school. Scholars in ESP like Bhatia (1993) and Swales (1990) perceived genre as a tool to analyze and teach English as a second/ foreign language. The ESP approach to genre is more pragmatic than theory- centered. It is difficult to link ESP to a particular view of language; however, it can be associated with communicative

language teaching (Swales, 1990). Genre in the ESP approach can be fed into the foreign classroom activities. Researchers in ESP classified genres as the formal properties and the communicative purposes of both spoken and written texts within the social context. Swales (1990) defined genre as a communicative event that has a communicative purpose, a structure, content, style, and specific audience. Basically, in ESP the focus was on the formal characteristics of genre while the functions and social contexts of texts were given less attention. For example, ESP scholars described structural elements (e.g. hedges, passive) and patterns of genres (e.g. IMRD schema in research articles, rhetorical development of texts) in academic and professional contexts. Genre studies, however, have now been integrated with corpus-based approaches (e.g. Flowerdew, 2005), and they have become more elaborate through the use of critical and ethnographic research (e.g. Dressen-Hammouda, 2013; Starfield, 2011).

On the other hand, the school of New Rhetoric in North America approached genre in a different manner (Hyon, 1996; Miller, 2015; Paltridge, 2001). Researchers and scholars paid more attention to the situational context of genres and the situatedness of the participants, not their forms. There was a focus on the social purpose and social actions (i.e., genres contextual and functional features). Genres are situated in contexts and have functions and purposes. The New Rhetoric approach to genre draws more on literary theories rather than linguistic ones and is more ideological in nature. Genres, thus, include members who have values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. While, the Australian and ESP approaches take a more linguistics approach and adapt the theories of functional grammar and the communicative purposes of genre. A rhetorical situation refers to a complex event that includes persons, objects, and relations. Accordingly, scholars of this approach employed ethnographic techniques in their studies. Whereas Burke (1969) focuses on motive (or action) in any rhetorical situation, Bitzer (1992) focuses on exigence (or reaction). Miller (2015) noted that research in the New Rhetoric approach focused on first language instruction of composition, rhetoric and professional writing in first language. Miller also added that the interest was not on the discourse's form but on the action it is intended to achieve (i.e. genre's function). In the same vein, Coe (2002) suggested that genre is a functional tie between the text type and a

particular situation. Rhetoricians perceive genre pedagogy as a complex matter and they have reservations to teaching it in the classroom. Both the New Rhetoric approach and the SFL-based 'Sydney School' are concerned with social acts and the role of context in understanding genres, though the latter focuses on the sociocultural aspect. Freedman and Medway (2003, p. 21) argue that context "encompasses [the hierarchical fusion of] both substance [semantic] and form [syntactic]" and in turn enables the interpretation of the action.

Genre in SFL

In addition to the aforementioned schools, genre theories also developed in Australia roughly at the same time as the other two approaches of ESP and New Rhetoric. In this approach, genre has been placed within Halliday's theory of language, SFL. The association between language and its functions in social settings is what SFL is basically concerned with. SFL views language as a social semiotic. Halliday (1978) defined three elements are key to shaping the forms of language. The first is 'field' that is the topic or activity taking place; second is 'tenor' which is the types of relationships between the participants, and third was 'mode' which is the medium of communication, such as written or spoken. The three elements of field, tenor, and mode determine the 'register' of language and that is also known as the register theory (Halliday, 1985).

Halliday introduced three types of meaning into SFL literature; ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Ideational meaning refers to what texts are about, interpersonal meaning is how relationships are made through language, and textual meaning refers to how information is organized into coherent texts. He called the three meanings 'metafunctions' which he associates with the three elements of register. Field correlates with ideational meaning, tenor is closely related to interpersonal meaning, while mode is oriented towards textual meaning (Halliday, 1985). In SFL, context is perceived as supervenient (i.e., is realized through language and communication). This does not mean that SFL ignores context, rather it treats it as an abstract higher stratum of meaning which is factored as field, tenor and mode and then assembled all together as genre. Contrary to ESP and New Rhetoric, Australian genre scholars initially identified and explicated key features of school genres (e.g. information report, recount,

exposition, narrative, review); then they trained teachers into the ways of explicating these features to their students, beginning in the earliest years of schooling, although studies by New Rhetoric scholars showed that elementary students have mastered the schema of stories without the “need for the explicit naming of the stages of narrative” (Freedman & Medway, 2003, p. 165). As the investigation of the benefits of genre education falls beyond the scope of this paper, we will suffice to say that although some students can identify the schematic structure of narratives from their experience, others need more or less explicit support to improve their language skills by drawing their awareness into the generic features (i.e. optional and obligatory elements) in language (e.g. Alyousef, forthcoming; Moore & Schleppegrell, 2014; O’Hallaron, Palincsar, & Schleppegrell, 2015). Finally, SFL does not deny the importance of context in determining the structural generic choices of a certain text. We outline in the next two sections Halliday’s and Martin’s views regarding the location of genre in the theory of language.

Genre in SFL as a single-stratum model

SFL in its early stages had a number of alternative models of social context, such as Halliday’s single-stratum model (1978) that included field, mode and style as context of situation variables. Then, Halliday changed the variable of style to mode. According to Halliday, any element of language is interpreted in relation to two contexts: (1) the cultural context and (2) the context of situation. Through the realization of register, culture is mediated through situation.

According to Halliday, the central and basic construct to language analysis was register not genre. In his theory of SFL, Halliday assigns genre to mode and separates it from the analysis of purposes and roles in social contexts. Whereas Martin (1985, 1992, 1999, 2009, 2011) correlates genre with the context of culture, Halliday (1978) associates it with mode. As he states, genre.

is an aspect of what we here call the ‘mode’. The various genres of discourse, including literary genres, are the specific semiotic functions of text that have social value in the culture. A genre may have implications

for other components of meaning: there are often associations between a particular genre and particular semantic features of an ideational or interpersonal kind, for example between the genre of prayer and certain selections in the mood system. (ibid, p. 145)

Halliday argues that register can be predicted by field, tenor and mode. Field deals with the content or topic, tenor refers to the participants’ relationship including power, contact and affective involvement, mode describes whether the text is spoken or written.

SFL “has always been of an evolutionary kind rather than of a revolutionary kind” (Matthiessen, 2007, p. 505) since Halliday’s theories were built on his immediate predecessors. Halliday’s association of genre with mode was influenced by Hymes’ (1967) triadic construct of mode which covers channel, key and genre. Channel refers to the medium of transmission (oral, written, telegraphic, etc), and key to the manner (gesture, wink, attire, etc) in which an act is done. Hymes (ibid, p. 25) defines genres as “categories or types of speech act and speech event”. Halliday associates genre with mode since situation is viewed as an instance of a system that is realized by language, as shown in figure 1

Halliday’s concept of open-ended meaning making semiotic potential (or language as a system) is the foundation of his theory. As Lukin et al. (2011, p. 189) state “Halliday’s notion of register is, in our view, particularly well geared to describing language variation and consistency without making such language variation isomorphic with social variation.” As shown in Figure 1, language consists of a set of finite interlocking systems of semantic choices, which are realized in wordings, or lexico-grammatical structures: in vocabulary and syntax.

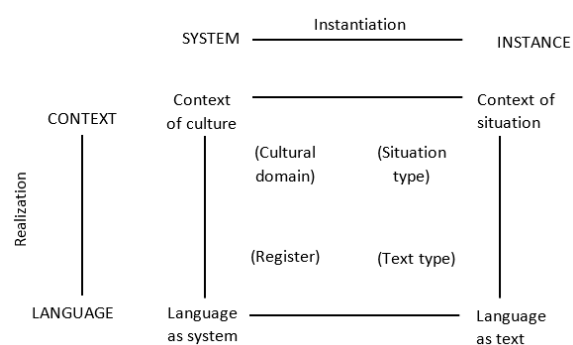


Figure 1 Language and context: system and instance (Source: Halliday, 1998, p. 8)

Context encapsulates not only the immediate situation in which meanings are being exchanged, but also the broader culture within which participants are embedded. As Halliday (1998) notes, culture is instantiated in situation, while system is instantiated in text. At the vertical level, the cultural context is construed in the linguistic system (or systems of language choice), while the situational context is realised in the text. Both the context of situation and the cultural context of any text define whether the discourse is thematically coherent or not. Whereas the context of situation encompasses the three register variables (Halliday, 1985), the cultural context is represented by genre which is, in turn, realized through mode. Lukin et al. (2011, p. 189) state that

As a central conceptual tool that does not stratify the relation of genre and register, Halliday's notion of register helps us recognize – or at least frame and test– the idea that recognized social situations might sometimes be the same register, or identify and evaluate the register differences in what are normally counted as 'the same' social activities.

Although the actual texts we process and produce are limited, the potential is unlimited as we usually interact with a new text, go through semiotic mediation of the text, and then produce a text that is aligned with our socio-cultural context. As Halliday (1998, p. 23) states in educational learning, all the four quadrants in the figure above are involved since

the learner has to 1) process and produce text; 2) relate it to, and construe from it, the context of situation; 3) build up the potential that lies behind this text and others like it; and 4) relate it to, and construe from it, the context of culture that lies behind that situation and others like it.

The context of culture is the system that lies behind each situational context, which in turn lies behind each text (language).

Genre in SFL as a two-stratum model

In SFL, Gregory's (1967) model of context included field, mode, personal tenor, and extra variable called functional tenor. The concept of functional tenor was a concern for Martin. As Martin (1999, p. 26) states, "the debate about modeling context was always in the air (from at least 1978)." Influenced by Gregory, Martin and Rothery (1980) and Martin (1999) initially used the nomenclature 'functional tenor' to refer to genre, but then it

was renamed genre to avoid confusion with personal tenor and to consolidate the association with text structure. Since the realization of genre spread not only to personal tenor but across the three metafunctions of field, tenor and mode, it was reconceptualized at a more abstract level of context. Martin (1985, 1992, 1999, 2009, 2011) posits that the 'higher level' of genre coordinates the three register variables in relation to social purpose. The elements of a generic (or schematic) structure are thus generated by genre networks, which in turn preselect particular values of field, tenor and mode in a given culture. One of Martin's key contributions to educational linguistics is the 'Sydney School' genre-based approach to language education (J.R. Martin, 2009).

Martin developed a theory of genre within SFL and the variable functional tenor was changed to genre. Martin used the term genre to refer to "staged purposeful social processes" (Martin, 2009, p.4). Martin (2009, p. 13) defines genre as "a recurrent configuration of meanings and a culture as a system of genres". Unlike Halliday, Martin treats culture as a system of genres that are realized through field, tenor and mode. Up to this stage, context was viewed as a single level.

Based on Hjelmlev's work, Martin (1992), developed a model of context that had three levels: ideology, genre, and register. The highest level of this model is ideology where the society's semiotic resources are represented. Ideology refers to the "assumptions that a social interactants bring with them to their texts" (Eggin & Martin, 1997, p. 237). It represents "the ideological formations that are realized in language" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999, p. 605). The stratum of genre represents the goal orientation which coordinates field, tenor and mode into generic structures, as illustrated in Figure 2.

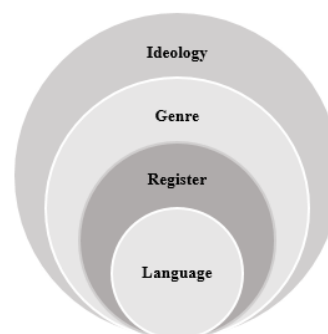


Figure 2: The stratified model of context (J.R. Martin, 1992)

Martin (1992) and colleagues (e.g. Ventola, 1987) proposed a new higher level for genre, context of culture, which is above and beyond Halliday's the context of situation stratum (or register). Martin describes both levels as being the main dynamic semiotic systems. As a result, meanings are created through processes called semogenesis (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999). Meanings exist in particular place and time due to the interaction of our consciousness and its environment (or semioses), i.e. genre and register. Influenced by Malinowski, Martin associates genre with the context of culture. According to him, a given culture organises the "meaning potential into recurrent configurations of meaning, and phases meaning through stages in each genre" (ibid p. 12). As stated earlier, our meaning potential is not limited. Genre is thus conceived as a distinct cultural semiotic system, rather than an aspect of 'mode', that correlates with texture.

Language in Figure 2 functions as the expression plane of the social semiotic system of register, which in turn functions as the expression plane of genre (J.R. Martin, 2014). A genre is realized through register which in turn is realized through language, i.e. "genre metaredundants with register which in turn metaredundants with language" (J.R. Martin, 1999, p. 38). The notion of metaredundancy means that register is a pattern of linguistic choices, and genre a pattern of register choices (i.e. more abstract levels are interpreted as patterns of less abstract ones).

Martin (1999, p. 30) extended the Hjelmslevian modeling of language and context, with "genre and register as layered connotative semiotic systems" whose expression plane was the denotative system (i.e. language). Connotative semiotics refer to "semiotic systems that make use of another semiotic system as their expression plane (as opposed to denotative semiotics that have an expression plane of their own" (Christie & Martin, 2000, p. 6). Martin (1997) later decided to give up the terms context of culture and context of situation since they were confusing. As he states

we were probably unhelpfully vague about the distinction between realisation as an inter-stratal or inter-rank relationship and instantiation (also called realisation) as the manifestation of system in process (of systemic potential in textualized actual). This may have masked for us the way in which Halliday was managing the relationship between context of

culture and context of situation at the time, which he saw as related by realisation, meaning instantiation; whereas when our educational colleagues talked about context of culture (i.e. genre) realised in context of situation (i.e. register) they meant inter-stratal realisation, not instantiation. (J.R. Martin, 1997, pp. 34-35).

Martin began to avoid the terminology (or the intertextual glosses) context of culture and context of situation since Halliday used them for instantiation, and not supervenience. In a debate over "context, instantiation and stratification" in Sys-Func's list server, Martin (2012, August 17) argues that context as a stratum of meaning in a stratified model is "formalized in genre networks realized through register (field, tenor and mode) networks", while in an unstratified model it is "formalized as field, tenor and mode networks." Martin (2014) argues for the need to expand the linguistic resources by developing a stratified model of context which maps genre across the various lexicogrammaticalisations. Genre configures meanings not only through discourse semantics, lexicogrammar, and phonology/graphology but also through the prosodic phases of evaluation. Thus this stratified model of context, modelled as register and genre, enabled Martin "to generalise appraisal resources across the various lexicogrammatical systems realising them, including incongruent realisations (involving grammatical metaphor)" (J.R. Martin, 2014, p. 19). Analyses of the interpersonal meanings were expanded to include evaluative language through the appraisal resources. This model resonates with Bernstein's {, 2000 #1696} socio-semantic codes theory which maintains that learners improve their experiences of genre when their coding orientation adapts with the given context (J.R. Martin & Rose, 2009). It also resonates with "Halliday's conception of SFL as an applicable linguistics" (J.R. Martin, 2014, p. 20). Applicable linguistics is based on both Halliday's register theory and Martin's genre approach. Unlike applied linguistics, applicable linguistics enables us to develop a powerful model of language in practical use- i.e. both "theoretical" and "applied"- that can be applied in different contexts and for various aims (Mahboob & Knight, 2010).

IV. CONCLUSION

Genre has triggered interesting ongoing debates not only across different camps of thought but also amongst scholars of the same school. In SFL, on the one hand, Halliday treats

genre as a single-stratum model and assigns it to mode, while Martin adds a stratum of culture (i.e. genre) that is higher than Halliday's context of situation stratum. According to Martin, context in a stratified model of meaning is formalized in genre networks through register, while in an unstratified model it is formalized as field, tenor and mode networks. Both aspects are indispensable for discourse analyses investigation. As Kołata (2010, p. 73) argues, genre and register analysis "should be treated as a single stage of a dynamic evolutionary process whose aim is to achieve the improvement of further theories." The three register variables of language (field, tenor, and mode) organize information at the level of genre into coherent texts. Genre is thus defined as the recurrent configurations of register variables. Currently, the focus is on genre and register applications and how to make the unconscious knowledge one has conscious by explicitly describing genres and how language is used to do things. Whereas the New Rhetoric School argues that genre was a natural matter that is picked up tacitly, Hyon (1996) noted that integrating genre in reading and writing classes and through conscious learning, students will be able to understand the genres of the target language cultures that they will unlikely acquire tacitly.

Acknowledgments

The authors are indebted to the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and helpful comments. The authors express their appreciation to both the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Saud University and to the Research Centre at the Faculty of Arts for funding and supporting the current article.

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